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helping your pre-teen say "NO"

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a parent's aid

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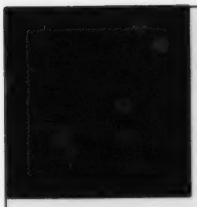

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This brochure, *Helping Your Pre-teen Say "No": A Parent's Aid,* is a short summary of a much longer booklet entitled *10 Steps to Help Your Pre-teen Say "No."* Both publications are designed to assist parents in guiding their pre-teens away from experimentation with alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, while enhancing the parent/child relationship. This brochure is a broad overview of prevention, while the longer version is an ideal tool for parenting workshops and for parents who wish to explore the subject in more detail. Those who would like a copy of the longer version may contact:

The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information
P.O. Box 2345
Rockville, MD 20852
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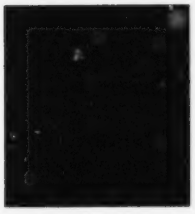


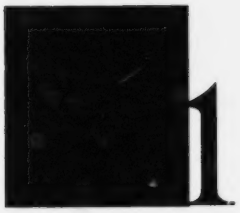
The problem? What problem?

If you find it hard to believe that a pre-teen is old enough to be concerned about alcohol and other drugs, you are not alone. But the plain truth is, pre-teens *are* concerned. A national survey conducted by Weekly Reader Periodicals found that:

- Four out of ten sixth graders say there is pressure from other students to use alcohol.
- Approximately 35 percent of fourth graders believe that drinking is "a big problem" for their age group.

As a parent of a pre-teen child, you have a special opportunity. Your child is in that "in between" age—old enough to understand many adult subjects, yet still young enough to willingly accept guidance from parents. This is a time when you can openly discuss the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse with your child, and prepare him or her for the peer pressure to experiment that will come in the near future . . . if it is not there already.

The answers to the 10 questions in *Helping Your Pre-teen Say "No": A Parent's Aid* have been reviewed and approved by experts in the prevention field for youth. The information has also been discussed in focus groups by parents of pre-teens to test its practicality. Since, of course, parents are the real experts on pre-teens, many of their suggestions were incorporated. □



What shall I say to my pre-teen about alcohol?

First, choose what educators refer to as a "teachable moment." This is simply a relaxed time when you can casually bring up the subject of alcohol, as opposed to a "formal talking to." Good times might be when you see drinking situations on TV or in magazine ads, if someone you know drinks too much at a party, or if you're serving alcohol as a part of a holiday meal.

Surveys have revealed that pre-teens get a lot of their ideas about alcohol from TV and movies. Yet many of these perceptions may be wrong. You can dispel some of the myths by making sure your child understands:

☐ While the media portray drinkers as attractive and talented, in real life there are just as many attractive and talented nondrinkers.

☐ Alcohol is a drug, like heroin or nicotine. It can dull judgment and muscle control. And it doesn't *ever* solve one's problems.

☐ Drinking is an activity for adults only—but drinking won't turn a minor into an adult. Only time and experience can do that. Drinking is illegal for minors, and they may be taken to special youth courts for breaking the law.

☐ People shouldn't depend on drugs to help them make friends. To grow into well-adjusted adults, children must learn the social skills involved in making friends without depending on a drug like alcohol.

☐ "Everybody" is *not* drinking and smoking. Only about 10 in 100 people have tasted alcohol by the time they're in the sixth grade, and even fewer smoke. ☐

How can I encourage my pre-teen to turn to me for guidance?

Children of all ages are more likely to talk with parents who know how to listen—about alcohol and other important issues. But there are certain kinds of parental responses, such as giving too much advice or pretending to have all the answers, that have been shown to block the lines of communication.

Effective listening is more than just "not talking." It takes concentration and practice. There are five listening skills that can help even the best parents reach their children. And, by the way, these skills can also enhance communication with other adults.

Listening Skill 1: *Rephrase your child's comments to show you understand.*
This is sometimes called "reflective listening." Reflective listening serves three purposes: it assures your child you hear what he or she is saying, it allows your child to "rehear" and consider his or her own feelings, and it assures that you correctly understand your child.

Listening Skill 2: *Watch your child's face and body language.*
Often a child will assure you that he or she does not feel sad, but a quivering chin or too-bright eyes will tell you otherwise. When words and body language say two different things, always believe the body language.

Listening Skill 3: *Give nonverbal support and encouragement.*
This may include giving a smile, a hug, a wink, a pat on the shoulder, nodding your head, making eye contact, or reaching for your child's hand.

Listening Skill 4: *Use the right tone of voice for the answer you are giving.*
Remember that your voice tone communicates as clearly as your words. Make sure your tone does not come across as sarcastic or all-knowing.

Listening Skill 5: *Use encouraging phrases to show your interest and to keep the conversation going.*
These helpful little phrases, spoken during appropriate pauses in conversation, can communicate to your pre-teen how much you care.
"Oh, really?"
"Tell me about it."
"Then what happened?" □

How can enhanced self-esteem help my child say "No" to alcohol and other drugs?

It may seem strange that self-esteem is directly related to alcohol and other drug use, but studies show that people with drinking problems usually have low self-esteem. A pre-teen who feels positive about himself or herself is more likely to have the self-respect to say "no" to alcohol and other drugs.

Just as there are five listening skills that can help a parent become a better listener, there are five "esteem-building skills" that parents can practice to increase a child's self-esteem.

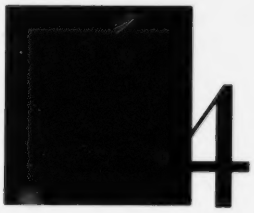
Esteem-Building Skill 1: *Give lots of praise, for effort as well as accomplishment.*
Look for achievement, even in small tasks, and praise your child often. Also let your child know that trying hard is even more important than winning.

Esteem-Building Skill 2: *Help your child set realistic goals.*
If the child, or the parent, expects too much, the resulting failure can be a crushing blow. Your pre-teen may not know that his or her personal best can make you just as proud as a blue ribbon.

Esteem-Building Skill 3: *When correcting, criticize the action, not the child.*
Helpful Example: "Climbing that fence was dangerous. You could have been hurt, so don't do it again."
Hurtful Example: "You shouldn't have climbed that fence. Don't you have any sense?

Esteem-Building Skill 4: *Give your child real responsibility.*
Children who have regular duties around the house learn to see themselves as a valuable part of a team, and completing their duties instills a sense of accomplishment.

Esteem-Building Skill 5: *Show your children you love them.*
Hugs, kisses, and saying, "I love you" help your child feel good about himself or herself. Children are never too old to be told that they are loved and highly valued. And contrary to popular belief, single-parent families can give children the same basis for self-esteem as two-parent families, as long as the parent-child relationship is strong and loving. Research shows that children of divorced parents are no more likely than others to abuse alcohol. □



Will the values taught at home make it easier for my pre-teen to say "No" to peer pressure to use alcohol?

Values, of course, are the things we believe in and the standards that seem right and important to us. Pre-teens are old enough to have ideas about right and wrong and to make decisions based on standards that matter to them. A strong value system can help children refuse to drink because it gives them a basis for weighing the facts.

Every parent has different values, and there is no *one* way to apply them to preventing pre-teen alcohol use. Most likely, your pre-teen will observe how family values affect your behavior, and he or she will adopt your attitudes and beliefs.

Some of the family values that may relate to preventing alcohol use among children are the following:

- ☐ Having personal or religious beliefs that reject alcohol use.
- ☐ Having personal or religious beliefs that reject *excessive* alcohol use.
- ☐ Valuing your freedom to make your own decisions, without having to "follow the crowd."
- ☐ Respecting the human body and desiring a healthy lifestyle.
- ☐ Believing that it is important to be in control of your own behavior at all times.

Whatever your values, the key is helping your child have standards that he or she believes are good and important. And when the pressure to experiment with alcohol or other drugs increases, your child will have strong family values to help guide his or her actions. ☐

How do my own attitudes toward alcohol and my drinking patterns affect my child?

Studies show that most adults are a lot like their parents in drinking habits. The amount you drink is not the only alcohol-related behavior you show your children. They also notice why you drink, when you drink, and whether you drive, boat, swim, or perform any other activity that is dangerous when combined with alcohol.

Research has not shown drinking in front of your children to be harmful. But studies do suggest that it is not good to drink too much in front of them. Showing children that adults may abstain or use alcohol occasionally in nonrisk amounts is setting a positive example.

Some of the ways you can be a good role model for your child are to have parties where alcohol is not the focus of activity, offer nonalcoholic drinks to guests who prefer them, never force drinks on guests, and make sure alcohol-impaired friends don't drive themselves home.

A parent who has an alcoholic spouse has an especially difficult task, because both the alcoholic parent's actions and the nonalcoholic parent's reactions often form harmful behavior models for children. There are, however, some ways to help children deal with alcoholism in the home. Some of these are listed below:

☐ Do not try to hide the problem. Children can cope best when you acknowledge that your spouse is an alcoholic.

☐ Make sure your children understand that alcoholism is a disease, like cancer or diabetes. And they can hate the disease and still love the sick parent.

☐ Educate yourself on alcoholism, and pass the information on to your children. Understanding takes some of the fear out of the disease.

☐ Join a group of spouses of alcoholics, and help your children find a similar group for children of alcoholics.

☐ Make sure your children do not feel responsible for the disease or for "binges."

☐ Try to provide some consistency and ritual for your family. Show the children that there *are* some things that they can depend on. ☐

What are "peer pressure skills?"

Peer pressure skills are techniques or actions that parents can use to prepare pre-teens to say "no" to alcohol and other drugs. Five such skills are listed below:

Peer Pressure Skill 1: *Teach your child to value individuality.*

During a teachable moment, tell your child what you think makes you a special and unique person. Talk about people the child loves and ask what makes these people individuals. Ask what your child likes about his or her own individuality, and add any nice characteristics that your child might leave out.

Peer Pressure Skill 2: *Explore the meaning of "friendship" with your child.*

Ask your child to make a list of "what a friend is" and another list of "what a friend is not." While your child is working on this, make a list of your own. Make a game of seeing how many of the same characteristics you both have on your lists.

Peer Pressure Skill 3: *Give your child the support needed to say "no."*

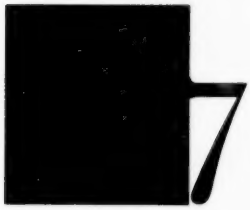
Most parents teach their children to be polite, respectful, and agreeable. While these are good traits in most situations, they do not necessarily prepare a child to stand up for himself. Children may need parental "permission" to say "no" to peer pressure. Tell your child that there are certain times one must insist on respect. These times include when peers push alcohol or other drugs at the child.

Peer Pressure Skill 4: *Know the facts about pre-teen drinking.*

There are certain situations that encourage pre-teen peer pressure to drink. For example, one reason children use alcohol is that they spend more time by themselves, and alcohol is easy to find in many homes. You can help your child avoid a sticky situation by making a rule that your child will not play at friends' homes when the parents are not home, nor will your child attend unchaperoned parties.

Peer Pressure Skill 5: *Use peer pressure.*

Many communities have found that peer pressure can also be a positive force. Some school systems and youth groups, for instance, sponsor "peer programs" where children support each other's positive values. You may wish to inquire about such a program at your child's school. □



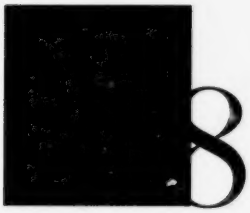
How important are family policies concerning alcohol experimentation?

Family policies are very important. Studies have shown that, contrary to popular belief, children *want* structure in their lives. They behave more responsibly when parents set limits.

Parents can help by going over *in advance* what may happen as a result of certain actions. Discuss with the child beforehand how you expect him or her to behave, what to do to carry out the behavior, and the logical results of doing or not doing it.

Make sure your child knows that under no circumstances is he or she to experiment with alcohol. And spell out the serious consequences that would follow. Verbalized or even written family policies can help your child say "no" to alcohol and assist in the development of responsibility.

Also, family policies automatically give your child an easy way of saying "no" to peer pressure: "No thanks. My parents told me last week that I would have to wait a whole extra year to get my driver's license if they caught me messing around with booze." □



How can I prevent my child from focusing on alcohol out of boredom or idle curiosity?

The answer to this question is to encourage healthy, creative activities, and here are two ways to do this: First, support your child's involvement in school activities, sports, hobbies, or music without pressuring your child to always win or excel. The specific activity is not important; when the child has positive interests he or she may be less likely to focus on alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs out of a lack of anything else to do.

The other way to encourage healthy, creative activities is to do them *with* your child. The key here is togetherness—surveys show that children appreciate the time parents spend with them even if doing chores is involved. □

What are other parents doing to fight pre-teen drug experimentation?

More and more parents are combining their efforts in support groups. They have found that when they join together, they can take broad steps that will reinforce the guidance they provide at home.

You can join a group that is already organized, or you can form a neighborhood council. Your group can raise the alcohol issue with relevant community organizations like parent-teacher organizations, churches, youth groups, health care facilities, etc. You can use your group's voice to influence school and local government policies that can affect pre-teen alcohol use, like starting a petition to make alcohol education part of the school's health education course, or convincing city officials to make a commitment to recreation programs and facilities for youth.

You will find, like other parents who have taken an active role in prevention, that there is much more power and support in numbers. □

What if, in spite of my efforts, my child drinks anyway?

With most pre-teens, it is hard to tell when they have tried alcohol because they do not drink enough to have noticeable effects. But while your child may not show signs of alcohol experimentation, your refrigerator or liquor cabinet may. Missing beer, or liquor that seems to be watered or going too fast, may alert you to a problem.

If you suspect your pre-teen has experimented with your liquor, you can immediately lock up or remove your supply. Next, talk with your child, but it is probably not a good idea to accuse him or her of taking the missing beverages. Accusations will make your child defensive, and he or she will focus on your anger rather than your message about alcohol use. Instead, lead into the subject casually. Go on to stress the undesirable effects alcohol has on the developing body and the reasons it is dangerous for children to drink.

If, on the other hand, your pre-teen drinks enough to show signs of a problem, counseling may be needed to avoid future problems. Telltale signs of alcohol abuse to watch for include sleeping at unusual times, erratic school work, complaints of "hangover" symptoms, a change in peer group, and frequent use of eye drops and breath mints.

If your pre-teen is drinking regularly, do not simply accept a tearful promise to stop. Alcohol is a drug, and your child should have help. He or she may be using alcohol to "self-medicate" a problem, and the drinking is probably a silent cry for help. In such situations, your doctor, pastor, guidance counselor, or local youth agencies can tell you where to go for the assistance you need. □

Prepared by the NIAAA National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information
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